

Matthew 4:1-11  
February 10, 2008

South Plains  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

### Who Are You, Really?

Several years ago, I was coming out of our Rotary Club meeting one day and my friend Tom introduced me to his wife, a pleasant woman with a heavy Russian accent. They were newly-weds. Tom had been widowed for a few years when he went on-line with a computer match-making system. After corresponding and eventually visiting with each other, he proposed and they married. He summed up the process like the businessman he is: "She needed to get married and I needed a woman." As far as I can tell, they are happy.

After I got over my shock, I realized that what Tom did at age sixty in looking for a wife is not so different from what we all do with any serious relationship. It's what our country is doing with Hillary, Barack, Mitt, John and Mike. Beyond the superficial impressions, the hype, and the hopes we have for any acquaintance, we always asking, "Who are you, really?" To the credit of the gospels, they each confront this question about Jesus early in their story. Matthew's temptation story is his way of revealing something important about Jesus' identity by watching him under pressure.

The temptations come immediately after his baptism in the River Jordan. The same Holy Spirit that descended on him like a dove, now leads him into the

wilderness to be tempted by the devil. It's almost as if God is saying, "Ok. You're my Son, my beloved Son, Now let's see you live up to your name." Or, is it the devil who is asking that question? In any case, we have to decide who this Jesus really is.

I think it's difficult for most of us to read this story as a real temptation. After all, Jesus is supposed to be God. Of course, he's not going to fall for some slick salesman with a hooved feet and a pointed tail. We have to read the story more as a teaching device, a paradigm of temptation. If we can do that, we may be able to learn not only more about Jesus' identity as the Son of God, but also more about our own identity as children of God.

A word about the devil: Whether you believe in a literal devil or not, I trust you can believe that evil may be personified in the devilish behavior of some people. C.S. Lewis reminds us in his *Screwtape Letters* that the one thing the devil most wants us to believe is that he does not exist. Disbelieving in evil personified leaves the door open to its influence in our lives.

The devil starts with the basics. Jesus has been fasting for forty days. He's hungry. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." If you are really who you say you are, you can feed yourself and all the hungry people of the world. It's such a reasonable idea.

But, of course, we do not live by bread alone. Welfare programs, which I believe are a good and necessary policy of good government, are not sufficient to make healthy, productive citizens. We collected four bins of food last Sunday. It's important that when we give this food away, that we give it through programs that encourage the dignity of recipients. Jesus will feed the hungry during his ministry, and he will make sharing a meal one of the central acts of Christian fellowship. Remember that these meals were a witness to God's love and a means to fellowship with Jesus. That doesn't mean that the food we give has to be accompanied by a sermon, but it does mean we have to give more of ourselves than just a handout.

Then the devil raises the stakes. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple." In other words, let's get a real following Jesus. Let's advertise your power so everyone can believe. You can be a pop hero in a moment's plunge from the temple.

Some people will do anything, say anything to get ahead. That's why choosing a president can be a difficult decision. We have to sort out the rhetoric of promises from the deep-rooted convictions of each candidate. Popularity is not everything, not even for a Savior, not even among churches. When Jesus warns the devil not to put the Lord your God to the test, he's warning himself and us. I would love to see South Plains become the most popular church in Albemarle County. But, not at the expense of our souls. Not if we're daring God to bless us

with a miracle. Not if we're avoiding the honest work of telling the gospel in a way that allows people to respond to Christ with integrity and to follow Christ when it requires sacrifice.

Finally the devil gives up the direct challenge to Jesus' identity. It's almost as if he is saying, Since you are the Son of God, since your mission is to bring the kingdom of God to earth, let's work together. "All these kingdoms I will give you if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus would be the King of the Jews, and the King of the Gentiles.

Ever since Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, I have been wondering about him, "Who are you, really?" I find myself surprisingly pleased with his commentary on Jesus' temptation to assume political power: "The struggle to avoid identifying Jesus' Kingdom with any political structure ...has to be fought century after century.... The fusion of faith and political power always comes at a price: faith becomes the servant of power (*Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 40)." Christianity will continue to influence our government because it's our calling; but we cannot ever allow our faith to become identified with our government, lest faith becomes the servant of politics.

Every year we enter the season of Lent with Jesus' triumph over these temptations as part of our lectionary readings. Of course the temptations don't end for Jesus when he leaves the wilderness. The crowds

will demand miracles just as insistently as the devil. They will tempt him to throw himself down from the cross, although that cry will be more of a taunt than a challenge. At one point, Jesus actually flees the crowds because they want to make him a king. In the end, the Romans crucify him as a seditious revolutionary and the Jews accuse him of the blasphemy of claiming to be the Son of God. The popularity he did achieve and the power he did demonstrate were not enough to save him from the sins of others.

Who are you really, Jesus? We believe he is the Son of God. But, the temptation story wants to underline for us that Jesus is also fully human. The book of Hebrews says “he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (2:17, 18).” Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth, and who was tested and tempted just as we are. His triumph is our triumph.

When I read about the kinds of things that tempted Jesus, I can easily see parallels with my own temptations to get attention with gifts or with a spectacle; or to gain power by associating with the wrong people. But, Jesus does not struggle with temptation the way most of us might. I think the reason is that he does not fight evil with will power, the way we do when we walk by the refrigerator at night determined not to get the second bowl of ice cream or the extra chicken wings.

What Jesus does is quite simple. He quotes scripture. Two things impress me about the way he quotes scripture. First, he knows it well enough to use it. He doesn't have to look up “bread” to see whether there's a commandment about turning stones into loaves, or jumping off the temple. Jesus understands scripture from the inside. The ancient fathers of the church called it interpreting scripture according to the rule of faith or the creeds of the church.

And, that's the second thing that impresses me about the way Jesus uses scripture: he knows when the devil is misusing it. So when the devil quotes Psalm 91 about God's protection, Jesus recognizes the promise of the psalm as an expression of trust in God's care, not a demand for a lifetime warranty.

In the end, the final temptation lays bare the conspiracy against God's mission to save the world through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. It comes down to worship. Whom will Jesus serve? God or the devil? Good or evil?

That's the overwhelming question of Lent. Do we worship the God who saves us in Christ, or do we put our trust in schemes to buy influence, to accumulate possessions, to win prestige?

Such a question is too much. Christians over the years have found it helps to break down that big question into something more manageable that can bring us a little

closer to trusting God instead of ourselves. The disciplines of Lent – fasting, praying, reading scripture, meditating on the promises of faith or doing specific acts of kindness – these disciplines can help us remember who we are in God's sight, who we can become in Jesus Christ.

I don't want to face any great temptations during the next six weeks. And, I certainly don't wish them on you. But, I know there will be forks in the road where we decide to turn this way or that. Our prayer for Lent is that we will choose well and trust that when the devil has left us, angels of some sort will wait on us, as they waited on Jesus. That's part of the promise of Lent.